

The economy of youth sports

This excerpt is from the blog of Tom Farrey-author of "Game On". The link to read more blog's from Tom Farrey is: <http://www.tomfarrey.com/>

You always remember your first ... of whatever. And in the case of Game On, the first letter that I received from a reader is one that I won't soon forget, because its message confirmed for me why this is an important book for any parent with a child involved in sports. It came from a mother in Texas, whose experience perhaps will both resonate and inspire.

I'll share the letter with you, in its entirety and without editing:

"Just finished your book over the weekend. I'm a recovering soccer mom and this book is right on target in addressing the problems facing youth sports in America. Every one of your points hit home, but for me the travel team situation was especially relevant. My now 14-year-old daughter played rec soccer from ages 5-12, and loved it, but once she reached the age when all her teammates tried out for travel teams, she had to give up soccer because there were no more rec teams. She was invited to fill in on a travel team to which we had a connection. They needed her to play for a few weeks and possibly join the team after that. It only took us about a month to see that you could forget about any kind of family life outside soccer if you joined one of these teams. The worst part for me was to see all the single parents and lower-income families sacrificing to scrape up the money for uniforms, entry fees, dues, hotels, gas, etc. because they had bought into the whole scholarship notion. In reality, by the time you put one or two kids through several years of travel team sports, you will have spent enough of your own money to pay for college without a scholarship. I just wanted to sit them down and explain to them that if you took the \$500+ per month, per child you were spending on this travel team and put it into a savings account for the kids NOW, you wouldn't need to worry about the scholarship in ten years and you could just let the kid ENJOY sports. Most of these girls had little chance at a scholarship anyway. In addition to the financial side of it, the pressure on these 12-year-old girls to win was horrendous, and for what? My daughter is a great athlete who has played every sport available at our small rural school (even football) and she loves the variety and the fun of changing sports with the seasons. So what if she's not D1 caliber in any of those sports? She's happy and healthy and still has time to be a kid. And her dad and I are putting her "travel team" funds into a 529 so she can fund her own scholarship!

Even though we aren't participating in travel team sports, we spend hours each month attending her school sports activities and have seen firsthand the bad behavior of parents toward officials and coaches. We've watched coaches "instruct" young players with profanity, physical punishment and screaming tirades. The list goes on and on. Believe me, I'm not criticizing these parents, I am one of them. I know a lot of great parents who feel uneasy about what we are doing to our kids, but they feel they have no choice but to go along with it to a point or risk denying their child opportunities to play. We need to see some leadership from the various youth sports organizations to put a stop to some of this madness.

I think you've written an important book that should be read by anyone connected with youth sports and I hope your information will help us start a conversation about how we can fix this mess."

In our society, we tend to view the behavior of individuals and groups through a moral lens. And while I was raised with a conscience, and a sense of personal responsibility, I've come to increasingly see the world in economic terms. That is to say, human behavior is often shaped by structural realities, financial or otherwise. We respond to the circumstances with which we are presented.

That's the case with organized youth sports as well. Since the 1992-93 school year, the amount of financial aid that NCAA member colleges and universities have handed out to athletes each year has quadrupled--from \$377 million to more than \$1.5 billion. Now, there are a lot of strings attached to that aid, as I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7 in the book. And, as shown in Appendix B, the odds of playing on the college level vary greatly by sport. But parents are encouraged to think of the potential rewards, and that psychology has played a dramatic role in shaping the behavior on sidelines at youth sports contests.

I would submit that the situation could actually be worse in the Texas town that reformed soccer mom is describing. Her daughter goes to a small high school, which means she still has access to participation opportunities. At large or even mid-sized high schools, where no more than 20 or so students make varsity soccer or baseball, there's often no room for kids like her daughter. There's a scarcity of opportunity, so the competition for roster spots begins early--like in grade school. Where parents understand the challenges ahead, so they go with the travel teams and year-round play that eliminate the kid who wants real balance in their life. And in that pressure cooker, sidelines sometimes explode. Again, it's an economic equation.

That's why I say that if we want to give sports back to the kids, we need to change the structural realities of organized youth sports--by enacting some of the reforms I talk about in the "10 Ways to Improve Youth Sports" link on the front page of the website.

Let me know what you think.